

PAINTING THE WINE-DARK SEA: TRAVELING AEGEAN FRESCO ARTISTS IN  
THE MIDDLE AND LATE BRONZE AGE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

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ABSTRACT

During the Middle and Late Bronze Age, the “civilized world” was not centered on the Aegean or the Mediterranean as in later centuries, but was instead shifted east. The older, established civilizations in Egypt and the Near East were the focus of commerce and diplomacy throughout the period, and the Aegean was located at the extreme western edge of their worldviews. In this sphere, three palaces at Avaris in Egypt, Tel Kabri in modern Israel and Alalakh in ancient Syria display Aegean frescoes and motifs. The question, therefore, becomes why? By examining the fresco fragments themselves I establish that the motifs represented and the style of manufacture are in fact Aegean. Textual evidence from the Near East and Egyptian tomb paintings suggest that the Aegean was well-known for its artistic accomplishments and that Aegean goods and the artisans that produced them were treated as elite commodities. This evidence ties the artisans into a context of royal gift exchange. Since frescoes themselves cannot be transported from one king to another, I believe that the artisans must therefore have traveled from the Aegean to the eastern palaces to adorn the walls of the foreign kings.